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The Fingerprints on Agca's Gun

It may take months before an Italian court tries three Bulgarians and four Turks now charged with plotting to kill Pope John Paul II. But the existence of a plot no longer seems conjectural. A wealth of detail suggests that Mehmet Ali Agca did not act alone, as he originally claimed, when he shot the Pope in May 1981.

Ilario Martella, an Italian magistrate known for his caution, formally charges that the accomplices included Bulgarian officials as well as Turkish terrorists — a charge that translates into a crime of state bearing Soviet fingerprints.

The evidence, of course, needs to be cross-examined in open court. But Soviet derision of the three-year investigation as a C.I.A. defamation is nonsense. Indeed, the Central Intelligence Agency was most skeptical of any state involvement even as the Italians' evidence of a Bulgarian connection was persuading journalists. Far from rushing to judgment, Western governments, led by the Reagan Administration, have recoiled from the devastating implication that Bulgaria's agents were bound to have acted only on a signal from Moscow.

Magistrate Martella well understands that the case for such complicity rests on the testimony of a proven liar. Mr. Agca repeatedly switched stories. He claimed knowledge of a Bulgarian plot to kill Lech Walesa when the Solidarity leader visited Rome, then disavowed it. Yet his accounts of meetings with Bulgarian officials are verifiable in important details — and so is his claim that after shooting the Pope he was to escape in a sealed Bulgarian truck.

Nor was he confecting fables when he said that a second Turkish gunman, Oral Celik, was present in St. Peter's Square. That the right-wing Turkish gang known as the Gray Wolves were the chosen instrument for this deed is now a certainty.

Chosen by whom? The evidence of Bulgaria's involvement is circumstantial but credible. Sofia's complicity with Turkish drug and gun smugglers is known. The Bulgarian émigré Georgi Markov was murdered in London in 1978 to silence such warnings as "In the streets of Sofia, you can meet Comrade Caligula, followed at a respectable distance by Comrades Talleyrand and Fouché." (Joseph Fouché organized Napoleon's political police.)

Bulgarian guilt is thinkable. What seems unthinkable is that its Caligulas would have raised a hand against the Polish Pope or that other Polish troublemaker, Mr. Walesa, without Soviet agents wanting it done. If Italian courts sustain the case against the Bulgarians, that further connection will have to be faced.

What might then be done is no easy question. The first thing, in preparation, is to make doubly sure the United States itself no longer practices or incites others to practice political terror and assassination. The second thing is to invite other Western nations to join in the already lively American debate about how to react to state terror. It's a challenge that cries out for a collective response.